

## Attachment Styles and Leadership Preferences in Adolescents and Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Traditionally, leadership has been considered to study in an organizational setting where they treat leadership as a stable set of behaviors or traits demonstrated by adults in the workplace. However, a new development in the research arena recognizes that leadership is fundamentally a relational phenomenon that has its roots in the early psychosocial development and the "internal working models" of relationships first formulated in childhood. This paper provides a critical review on the interplay between the attachment style and leadership preference and how these two variables develop from adolescence to adulthood. This paper indicates the importance of exploring how adolescents prefer leadership differently than adults. Furthermore, by drawing upon an evolutionary and lifespan perspective, this review explores how early adverse childhood experiences, emotional regulation competencies, and implicit leadership theories shape our relational expectations. Ultimately, it underscores that both adolescent leadership emergence and adult followership are continuously driven by a fundamental psychological need for a secure base and relational safety.

**Keywords:** Attachment Styles, Leadership Preferences, Adolescents, Adults

Leadership is a relational and dynamic process through which an individual influence other toward the achievement of shared goals (Northouse, 2019). Contemporary leadership research increasingly recognizes leadership not merely as a set of traits but as a socially embedded process shaped by interpersonal experiences and psychological development (Liden et al., 2025). Among the theoretical frameworks explaining long-term interpersonal functioning, attachment theory provides a strong foundation for understanding how early relational experiences influence later social and leadership behaviors.

Attachment theory, originally proposed by Bowlby (1969), posits that early interactions with caregivers lead to the formation of internal working models of self and others. These internal representations guide expectations about relationships, emotion regulation strategies, and social behavior across the lifespan. Ainsworth's empirical research further identified distinct patterns of attachment. These were categorised as secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant through the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, 1978). These attachment patterns have

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been extended to adolescence and adulthood and are considered relatively stable yet developmentally influenced constructs (Mikulincer et al., 2016).

Building upon this foundation, recent lifespan approaches emphasize that leader development is an ongoing trajectory which rooted in stage-specific experiences from childhood, peer play through adolescence and into adulthood that interacts dynamically with a person's internal working models. During adolescence, the shift toward peer relationships serves as a critical incubator for social competence and leadership emergence; secure parental attachments provide the socioemotional scaffolding needed for emotional regulation and peer intimacy, while adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and insecure attachments can impair the executive functioning required to lead. As individuals transition into adulthood, these early relational schemas subconsciously shape their Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs), dictating whether they expect an "ideal" leader to be sociable and considerate or whether they project relational anxieties onto authority figures. Consequently, modern literature increasingly views organizational leaders as evolutionary attachment figures tasked with providing a "secure base" and "safe haven," where demonstrating both care and competence is vital for establishing trust. Attachment orientations directly impact broader workplace dynamics, influencing Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), job satisfaction, burnout, and even followers' preferences for personalized versus socialized charismatic leaders. Despite methodological calls to rely on objective behavioral metrics to avoid conflation in survey measures, attachment theory remains a robust paradigm for understanding both leadership and followership across the lifespan.

### METHODOLOGY OF LITERATURE SEARCH

To systematically map the conceptual overlap between attachment styles and leadership across the lifespan, a literature search was modeled after the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.

#### *Search Strategy:*

The primary databases queried included PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science (WOS). The search algorithm utilized combinations of three blocks of Boolean terms: (1) attachment OR internal working models OR relational schemas; AND (2) leadership preference OR leadership emergence OR followership; AND (3) adolescence OR adolescent OR adult OR lifespan.

*Table 1 Core Studies Reviewed*

Author(s) & Year	Target Population	Core Focus	Critical Interpretation & Findings
Liu et al. (2021)	Lifespan (Preschool to Late Adulthood)	Dynamic experiences-grounded approach to leadership.	Leadership is not immediately occurred in adulthood. It is a continuous process in which each life stage experiences (e.g., childhood peer play, adolescent extracurriculars) interact with leader self-views.
Tackett et al. (2023)	Adolescents	Early leadership emergence and development.	Adolescence is a pivotal, unique period for emergence of a leader. Teen social hierarchies and peer-influence mechanisms serve as the primary training ground for adult leadership capacity. The peer interaction in school set up like classroom and extracurricular activities gives adolescents opportunities to develop leadership qualities.

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Author(s) & Year	Target Population	Core Focus	Critical Interpretation & Findings
<b>Delgado et al. (2022)</b>	Adolescents	Systematic review of parental attachment and peer relations.	Secure attachment given by caregivers in early stages of life provides the necessary socioemotional base for adolescents to establish friendships that gives them opportunities to enhance their social competence. Thus, it formulate their self-esteem. These interactions with peers also provides them an emotional safety that helps them to achieve other resources or materialistic goals.
<b>Mónaco et al. (2019)</b>	Adolescents	Emotional development, well-being, and attachment.	Emotional competence significantly mediates the relationship between parental attachment and adolescent well-being. Securely attached teens are aware of their emotions and hence, they regulate it better that aids in group integration.
<b>Sujan Kumar &amp; Raj (2016)</b>	Adolescents	Social competence and attachment styles.	Adolescents who are securely attached to their caregivers, have enough skills to render great social competence, which is a core component of leadership. Gender dynamics also play a substantial role in how these social competencies manifest.
<b>Pous Sastre et al. (2021)</b>	Adolescents	ACEs, anxiety, and school performance.	Early rejection by parents or traumatic experiences forces self-sufficiency defense mechanisms. There's the underlying anxiety which impairs the executive functioning and self-regulation required for academic/social leadership.
<b>Berson et al. (2006)</b>	Young Adults (College Teams)	Implicit leadership theories and emergence.	Attachment styles guide expectations of followers from their "ideal" leaders. Secure individuals expect considerate and sociable leaders, while insecure styles project their relational anxieties onto authority figures.
<b>Davidovitz et al. (2007)</b>	Adults (Military Officers & Soldiers)	Leaders as attachment figures.	Leaders functionally model themselves as caregivers. Leader anxiety arises from self-serving motives, which usually harms unit performance. Leader avoidance becomes impedance for emotional support, directly degrading follower mental health.
<b>Mayseless &amp; Popper (2019)</b>	Adults	Evolutionary perspective on attachment and trust.	Proposes the <i>Care and Competence Model</i> . Followers inherently seek a "stronger and wiser" figure. Without both emotional care and perceived competence, trust in leadership cannot form.
<b>Harms (2011)</b>	Adults (Workplace)	Adult attachment styles in organizational behavior.	Most of the research on job performance, leadership and other organizational outcomes has focused on personality. A new body of researchers is now exploring the impact of attachment theory on leadership which offers a superior framework for understanding Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and workplace trust.

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<b>Liden et al. (2025)</b>	Adults (Workplace)	Evolution of leadership and methodological critiques.	The research field is saturated with too many leadership approaches which are heavily overlapping with existing ones. The current methodology is flawed of "conflation" in surveys, because it is combining different concepts like feelings, perceptions, and actual behaviour. The measure of leadership style should be more objective and dyadic analysis shall be considered.
<b>Côté et al. (2010)</b>	Young Adults (Small Groups)	Emotional intelligence and leadership emergence.	Found that overall emotional intelligence, specifically the ability to understand emotions (measured via ability tests rather than self-reports), fundamentally predicts leadership emergence over and above cognitive intelligence and personality traits.
<b>Lacasa &amp; Muela (2014)</b>	Adolescents and Adults	Clinical application of the CaMir-R attachment questionnaire.	Demonstrates the utility of measuring internal working models of attachment. Emphasizes that evaluating dimensions like security, family interference, and self-sufficiency is vital for understanding relational and emotional adjustments in social contexts.
<b>Balluerka et al. (2011)</b>	Adolescents and Adults	Validation of the reduced CaMir-R assessment.	Provided a validated, reduced assessment tool for attachment styles. This facilitates robust empirical testing of how cognitive representations of early caregiver interactions predict psychological and social functioning across different populations.
<b>Ainsworth et al. (1978)</b>	Infants / Lifespan	Foundational patterns of attachment.	Utilizing the Strange Situation procedure, this foundational work identified secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant styles. It empirically established that early caregiver interactions form the blueprint for future relational expectations and social competence.
<b>Bowlby (1969)</b>	Lifespan	Foundational attachment theory.	Proposed that early interactions with caregivers form "internal working models." These mental schemas remain relatively stable across the lifespan, deeply influencing how individuals approach social interactions, peer integration, and authority figures.
<b>Popper &amp; Mayseless (2003)</b>	Adults	Parenting perspective on transformational leadership.	Argues that leaders functionally replace parents in adulthood. Transformational leaders act as "stronger and wiser" caregivers who provide a secure base and safe haven, allowing followers to explore, take risks, and develop their own capacities.
<b>Mikulincer &amp; Shaver (2007)</b>	Adults	Attachment in adulthood and emotion regulation.	Details how the attachment behavioral system remains active in adulthood. It profoundly influences psychodynamics, interpersonal processes, and how individuals regulate stress, anxiety, and intimacy in relational or leadership contexts.
<b>Keller</b>	Adults	Implicit leadership	Showed that parental images and childhood

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Author(s) & Year	Target Population	Core Focus	Critical Interpretation & Findings
(2003)		theories.	attachment histories directly guide leadership sensemaking. These internalized schemas shape what individuals implicitly expect from "ideal" leaders and how they interact with authority in the workplace.
Yip et al. (2017)	Adults (Workplace)	Attachment theory at work and future research.	Highlights the critical role of attachment in management scholarship. Recommends experimental and network approaches to understand how attachment orientations dictate Leader-Member Exchange, proactive behaviors, and relational friction.
Wu & Parker (2017)	Adults (Workplace)	Leader secure-base support.	Demonstrated universally across cultures that leaders who provide a secure base (through availability, encouragement, and noninterference) actively facilitate proactive work behavior, self-efficacy, and autonomous motivation in followers.
Richards & Hackett (2012)	Adults (Workplace)	Attachment, emotion regulation, and LMX.	Found that attachment anxiety and avoidance negatively affect self-reported Leader-Member Exchange quality. Crucially, the effective use of emotion regulation strategies (like reappraisal and suppression) can moderate these attachment-driven interactions.

### CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

#### *The Developmental platform: Adolescence as the Crucible of Leadership*

A critical limitation of classical organizational psychology is the assumption that leadership development begins when an individual enters the workforce. Lifespan developmental models have challenged this concept, stating that the seeds of leadership are planted in early childhood and catalyzed during adolescence. Thus, adolescence represents a vital transitional stage of life where individuals shift their primary relational focus from parents to peer groups, making it the primary training ground for creating their identity in order to reach a certain hierarchy in the social world. Expanding on this, Liu et al. (2021) advocate for a dynamic, experiences-grounded approach, emphasizing that leader development is an ongoing trajectory rather than an isolated adult phenomenon. The internal working models first identified by Bowlby (1969) and empirically observed by Ainsworth et al. (1978) establish the foundational schemas of self-worth and relational trust. As children progress through stage-specific experiences from early peer play to structured extracurriculars, these schemas interact continuously with their evolving leader self-views, dictating their propensity to assume influence across the lifespan.

According to Tackett et al. (2023), the nuanced social environment of teenagers, characterized by the pursuit of likeability versus perceived popularity i.e. status/dominance, mirrors the prestige versus dominance strategies seen in adult executive leadership. The capacity to emerge as a leader in these adolescent networks is heavily dependent on the individual's internalized working models of attachment. Delgado et al. (2022) explored this connection, showing that adolescents who experienced secure parental attachment are capable to regulate their emotions and show trust to form deep, meaningful peer bonds. On the contrary, adolescents with insecure attachment histories (anxious or avoidant) struggle to

have peer intimacy due to lower self-coherence and a heightened sensitivity to social rejection. This social competence is not merely about making friends, it is the fundamental framework of becoming an effective leader. Sujan Kumar and Raj (2016) reinforce this framework, finding that securely attached adolescents naturally possess the social competence required for leadership, navigating peer dynamics with higher empathy and prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, the clinical application of specific attachment assessments, such as the reduced CaMir-R questionnaire, underscores that evaluating dimensions like perceived family security versus family interference provides a highly accurate predictor of an adolescent's relational and emotional adjustment in group settings (Balluerka et al., 2011; Lacasa & Muela, 2014).

Mónaco et al. (2019) demonstrate that emotional competence, the ability to perceive, express, and regulate emotions, acts as a significant moderator between early attachment security and subsequent psychological adjustment. When adolescents suffer from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or parental rejection, they often adopt compensatory strategies, such as forced self-sufficiency. While this may seem as independence, it masks underlying anxiety that drains executive functioning, ultimately sabotaging academic performance and the ability to lead peers effectively. Pous Sastre et al. (2021) further validate this by showing that the accumulation of ACEs directly correlates with insecure, avoidant attachment styles, driving up the state and trait anxiety which heavily impairs the cognitive focus required for school and social leadership. This highlights that objective emotional intelligence—specifically the ability to accurately understand and manage emotions—is not just a secondary skill but a primary mechanism predicting leadership emergence, often overriding raw cognitive intelligence and personality traits in small group dynamics (Côté et al., 2010).

### ***Attachment and Implicit Leadership Theories in Adulthood***

As adolescents transition into adulthood, their internalized relational schemas almost remain stable. In fact, they project their securities and insecurities onto their authority figures in the organizational structures. Berson et al (2006) provides substantial evidence that attachment styles directly shape Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs). As per the theory, people categorise others as leaders or non-leaders by comparing their behaviours and traits with pre-existing templates they have in their subconscious mind. Keller (2003) expands on this process, revealing that parental images and early childhood attachment histories act as the direct blueprints for this leadership sensemaking in the workplace. As Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) detail, the evolutionary attachment behavioral system does not become dormant in adulthood; rather, it profoundly governs adult psychodynamics, dictating how individuals regulate stress, evaluate interpersonal threats, and expect support from authority figures.

In their study of college teams, secure individuals were not only more likely to emerge as leaders themselves, but they also preferred leaders who were highly considerate and sociable toward their team members. On the other hand, those with insecure-ambivalent attachments gave less value to leaders who were considerate, while avoidant individuals devalued sociability. This implies that followers do not evaluate leadership objectively. An individual's inclination towards a specific leadership style is navigated by their fundamental psychological need to feel safe or to defend against relational disappointment.

Harms (2011) echoes this, noting that despite the dominance of the Five-Factor Model in HR literature, attachment theory provides a much more robust explanation for the dyadic friction and trust issues observed in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) relationships. Yip et al. (2017) emphasize that this attachment-driven friction requires advanced network and experimental

approaches to fully understand LMX quality and proactive behaviors in management. Richards and Hackett (2012) found that followers with high attachment anxiety or avoidance consistently self-report poorer LMX, though they noted that the effective use of emotion regulation strategies (like cognitive reappraisal) can help mitigate these negative interactive effects.

Crucially, leadership is a dyadic exchange: Wu and Parker (2017) demonstrated that when leaders actively provide "secure-base support"—signaling availability, encouragement, and noninterference—they universally facilitate proactive work behaviors, self-efficacy, and autonomous motivation, even in followers burdened by attachment insecurities. This dynamic ultimately aligns with the Care and Competence Model, which suggests that followers are phylogenetically wired to seek out "stronger and wiser" parent-like leaders who project both emotional care and operational competence (Mayseless & Popper, 2019; Popper & Mayseless, 2003).

### ***The Evolution of Leadership Preferences: From Peer Integration to Organizational Expectations***

The transition from adolescence to adulthood brings a profound evolution in how individuals perceive and prefer leadership. During the teenage years, adolescents operate within highly sensitized peer networks where leadership preferences are inextricably linked to social hierarchies, sociometric popularity, and group integration (Tackett et al., 2023). At this stage, teens naturally gravitate toward peers who exhibit high emotional competence and prosocial behaviors, as these traits facilitate social inclusion and peer intimacy (Sujan Kumar & Raj, 2016; Mónaco et al., 2019). However, as individuals transition into emerging adulthood and enter complex organizational environments, these preferences mature into formalized Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs). Rather than merely seeking social acceptance, adults begin to subconsciously evaluate leaders against internalized parental templates formed early in life (Keller, 2003; Berson et al., 2006). This lifespan trajectory demonstrates that adult followership is an evolved preference, continuously shaped by dynamic, stage-specific experiences (Liu et al., 2021). Consequently, while an adolescent might seek a leader who ensures peer popularity, an adult seeks a "stronger and wiser" figure who projects both care and competence. For example, secure adults actively prefer socialized, transformational leaders who offer consideration, whereas insecure adults may project their unresolved relational anxieties by preferring personalized, dominant, or emotionally distant leaders (Berson et al., 2006; Shalit et al., 2010; Popper & Mayseless, 2003).

### ***The Trajectory of Attachment: Structural Continuity and Contextual Adaptation***

Parallel to the evolution of leadership preferences, an individual's attachment style undergoes a dynamic, yet structurally cohesive, transition from adolescence to adulthood. Foundational attachment theory posits that the "internal working models" forged with early caregivers remain relatively stable throughout the lifespan, providing a persistent psychological blueprint for self-worth and interpersonal trust (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Nevertheless, adolescence represents a normative developmental inflection point where primary attachment needs progressively shift away from parents and are transferred onto peer groups and early romantic partners (Delgado et al., 2022). While the core orientations such as secure, anxious, or avoidant; often persist through this transition, modern literature emphasizes that these styles are not entirely rigid. As adolescents mature into adults, their attachment schemas remain malleable and can be reshaped by significant life events, emotional regulation training, and workplace dynamics (Harms, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In adult organizational contexts, these attachment needs are frequently redirected

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toward authority figures, effectively transforming managers and executives into surrogate attachment figures who are expected to provide a safe haven during times of stress (Davidovitz et al., 2007; Maysseless & Popper, 2019). Therefore, the development from adolescence to adulthood is characterized by a structural continuity of the internal working model, coupled with the flexibility to adapt these relational schemas to navigate the complexities of adult professional hierarchies.

### ***Leaders as Attachment Figures: The Care and Competence Paradigm***

The most profound conceptual shift in recent leadership literature is the recognition that leaders functionally serve as adult attachment figures. In times of organizational stress, uncertainty, or crisis, the evolutionary attachment system is activated, and followers look towards their leaders to have a "safe haven" and a "secure base". Maysseless and Popper (2019) conceptualize this through the evolutionary Care and Competence Model. Considering Bowlby's original definition of the caregiver as "stronger and wiser," they discussed that followership is an ingrained, evolutionary evolved response. People trust a leader only when they feel that their leader genuinely cares about them, and he/she is capable of guiding them. If either the care or competence is missing, it breaks the trust. And without it, leadership falls apart.

Research by Davidovitz et al. (2007) shows this clearly, even in high-pressure military settings. They found that when leaders feel insecure in themselves, it affects how they lead. Leaders who fear rejection often become more self-focused and struggle to stay effective in their role. In simple terms, if a leader doesn't feel secure within, they find it harder to create a sense of safety and direction for others. Leaders with avoidant attachment styles, usually maintain a distance from emotional connection, fail badly as security providers. Consequently, the soldiers under avoidant leaders have shown significantly weak socioemotional functioning and which can decline mental health during combat training. This elucidates that a leader's internal working model is not a private psychological variable rather it is an organizational variable that directly impacts the psychological safety and performance of the collective. Expanding upon this, contemporary attachment theory fundamentally operates as an emotion regulation framework. Leaders possessing a secure attachment orientation exhibit a superior capacity to regulate negative affect, enabling them to remain emotionally available to their subordinates. Conversely, avoidant leaders tend to systematically deactivate their attachment systems and suppress emotional expression, whereas anxious leaders hyperactivate their systems, leading to overreactions and sustained negativity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In a dyadic context, this emotional competence profoundly governs the workplace ecosystem. By consistently providing a secure base through physical availability, verbal encouragement, and noninterference, leaders universally catalyze proactive work behaviors, self-efficacy, and autonomous motivation among their followers, effectively buffering against the followers' own underlying attachment insecurities (Wu & Parker, 2017).

### ***Methodological Critiques and the Path Forward***

While the integration of attachment theory into leadership is conceptually rich, it faces methodological hurdles. Liden et al. (2024) warn against "construct proliferation" and the over-reliance on self-reported survey measures in positive leadership studies, noting that asking participants to rate a leader's intent, behaviors, and effects simultaneously leads to causal conflation. To achieve true scientific rigor, future research must move beyond self-report questionnaires like the CaMir-R which, while useful for broad structural assessments may lack the depth to capture unconscious relational defenses. Experts suggest utilizing the

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Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) for a more precise assessment of internal working models. Furthermore, as Harms (2011) suggests, the field must adopt dyadic and multilevel analyses that simultaneously measure both the leader's and the follower's attachment styles, as the interaction between an avoidant leader and an anxiously attached follower will produce vastly different outcomes than other pairings.

Indeed, to circumvent the causal indeterminacy highlighted by Liden et al., scholars must increasingly integrate objective behavioral metrics and non-survey performance outcomes into their research. For instance, evaluating emotional intelligence which is a vital correlate of attachment via objective ability tests rather than self-report scales has proven significantly more accurate in predicting true leadership emergence in groups (Côté et al., 2010). While structural tools like the reduced CaMir-R maintain high clinical utility for rapidly identifying insecure-avoidant or disorganized trajectories (Balluerka et al., 2011; Lacasa & Muela, 2014), the true complexity of leader-member exchange requires advanced network analyses that capture reciprocal organizational friction (Yip et al., 2018). Ultimately, embracing robust, prospective longitudinal designs that track individuals from their earliest adolescent peer interactions through late adulthood will be essential to map the complete, dynamic lifespan trajectory of leadership formation (Liu et al., 2021; Tackett et al., 2023).

### CONCLUSION

The synthesis of the literature indicates that leadership is not merely an isolated skillset acquired upon entering the workforce, but rather the culmination of a lifelong relational trajectory. Adolescence serves as the critical developmental crucible where secure early attachments translate into the emotional competence and peer intimacy necessary to forge future leaders. In adulthood, these internalized working models dictate both our implicit preferences for specific authority figures and the manner in which we lead others. By understanding leaders as evolutionary attachment figures tasked with projecting both care and competence, organizations and educational institutions can move beyond redundant behavioral frameworks to better identify, nurture, and support authentic leadership potential across the human lifespan.

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